

Why historical materialism matters

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At the core of Marxism is the methodology of historical materialism (HM), which “regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence.”¹ As developed by Marx and Engels, the dialectical materialist conception of history is not just an interpretation of the world; it is a guide to active transformation and “in its essence critical and revolutionary.”²

Of course, it can be argued that any study of history is necessarily a study of social development. Unlike histories defined by the acts of presidents, generals, bankers or other elites, and measured against the Idea, or Moment or other ideological abstractions, historical materialism proceeds from an analysis of how *society as a whole* functions, “starting with the material production of life itself and comprehending the form of intercourse connected with and created by this mode of production.”³ In other words, historical materialism is a study of societies as they really are — as diverse and complex assemblies of people with various needs and aspirations. In order to do that, we need to examine society in all its stages and component reciprocal actions; how people make their lives, enact the state (laws, governance), and conduct themselves ideologically through religion, philosophy, ethics, morality, art, literature, music, etc. These activities and expressions are in fact social practices and, taken together, form the cultural matrix of the given society.

In 1848, Europe was still emerging from the centuries-long hold of feudalism and monarchism. From that vantage point, Marx and Engels had a palpable sense of the old social formations — dying but not yet dead — as well as the newly emerging ones, especially a rising class of proletarians for whom social revolution was on the immediate agenda.⁴ Thus, Marx and Engels developed their framework in active opposition to the idealism which, then as now, reinforced the dominant narratives of the day. And it was through that struggle that they were able to stand Hegel’s dialectical method ‘right side up’ and develop a science of the general laws of motion of

the external world and of human thought, so that the real world was approached as the *source* of ideas, and not the other way around.⁵

HM proceeds from the hypothesis that our social being produces our consciousness; how we think and what we think are construed from our collaborations and communication with others. We devise our ways of life through networks of economic, political, and ideological social relationships, which we usually call ‘society.’ This sociality is a defining characteristic of humans; we could not exist, much less create culture, outside our social practices. Furthermore, the reciprocal interaction of our thinking and being is transformative; through our social practices we intentionally — and unintentionally in some cases — change our conditions of life, including how and what we think.

In this way, we produce our history, not as a recurring series of equivalent events, but as ongoing transformative experiences. Thus, human cultural history is oriented; it is a continuum of social practices that intersect in a complex matrix and which extend from and build upon collective past practices. How we live today is not how people lived two hundred or two thousand or two hundred thousand years ago. Neither are societies identical; each contains its own specificity and history. That said, how we live today is based in some part on how we have lived in the past and societies often share features that are built from similar social practices. An analogy can be drawn from biology: natural history is oriented in its evolution in that new species derive from species, body plans and organs that already exist, not according to a metaphysical system of phylogenetic progress. Furthermore, as biology, geology, astrophysics, and other sciences have subsequently shown, all life on this planet and all matter in the universe have histories too.

Orientation — the continuum of formative practices — does not preclude accident or obviate contingency. Social development is inexorable through time, but not in regard to its structure. Societies are what we make them to be, but we operate “under circumstance directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”⁶ Societies arise according to specific conditions of material life, and as history demonstrates, they continue to undergo various subtle and dramatic changes over time: technologies are invented and become obsolete, forms of symbolization are transformed and deprecated, shared knowledge (oral or written) of the world is

gained, forgotten or destroyed. As history also demonstrates emphatically, when the functional conditions of life of enough members of a society come into sharp conflict with how that society is directed or organized, resolutions are found in climactic and sudden events, often pitting one section against another, or pitting all against nature. Mass migrations, epidemics, wars and revolutions are all examples of resolving events.

Marx and Engels first presented their ‘materialist conception of history’ in polemics against the ‘idealist conception of history’ espoused by certain academic Hegelians⁷ and Ludwig Feuerbach. Starting with those polemics and specifically with *The German Ideology*, written in 1847, historical materialism provides a bright red thread running through their subsequent decades of collaboration, as demonstrated in their many practical applications: *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*; *Capital*; *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*; *The Civil War in France*; *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*; and their many other investigations of history, contemporary society and the struggle for socialism.

Since all scientific theories are developed from fact, my intent here is to illustrate the validity of HM by drawing on the empirical evidence of human social history: anthropology, psychology, archaeology, and other social sciences. Marx’s own study of the history of law and philosophy provided him with a starting point (e.g. the ideological and political superstructure of societies) for developing this theory, and his extensive study of capitalism, using England as its primary data set, is summarized in his famous critique.⁸ However, the data available today is more extensive than that obtainable in 1847 or 1867.

I do not presume to exhaust this subject, which is not possible in any event. Neither am I interested in compiling a set of rules or formulas or mechanistic ‘just so’ statements. What I do hope to accomplish is a cogent explanation of key theses within the HM methodology and an exploration of certain misconceptions, in the spirit of “revolutionizing the existing world, of practically coming to grips with and changing the things found in existence.”⁹

Humans as Social Animals

More than a simple statement of fact, we are animals and so we have a natural history. Our species, *Homo sapiens*, is a sub-set of the *Hominidae* family within the *Primates* order. We share a common ancestral species with and are most closely related to other hominids — chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans. Those animals (with the possible exception of Borneo orangutans) as well as the Old World monkeys and some other primates are social-banding creatures from which we can infer that earliest members of our species also lived that way. Early humans in Eastern Africa very likely lived in groups that jointly gathered food, secured shelter and biologically reproduced. It is also likely that early human bands observed some form of internal hierarchy aligned with age and sex. Based on ethnographic analogy, it is reasonable to suggest that the exploitation of female and juvenile labor emerged early as expressions of such a hierarchy,^{10,11,12} and rudimentary manifestations of exploitive practice have been observed among collateral species^{13,14,15,16} (e.g. adult males aggressively taking food that has been gathered by females or juveniles).

Successful population groups are by definition those that solve the problems of maintenance and reproduction of the group, which of course takes place in relation to the group's environment. This is a necessary quality for biological evolution, and it is a necessary quality of social evolution.¹⁷ Functional groups are able to cooperate and are multi-generational. They have a need to communicate and they have learned behavior that can be shared among peers and with the younger generation. It is in these functions that we can begin to discriminate the capabilities of humans from those of other hominids. Very significantly, comparative observations of humans and other great apes show that the human infants display a capacity for understanding shared intentions. In other words, as part of our cognitive development we learn — before we can speak — that other humans are agents with whom we can cooperate.^{18,19,20,21}

It is in the course of cooperation that we learn vocabulary and other cultural information. As everyday events show us, speech acquisition is an on-going social practice. We are continually encountering — and inventing — new words and new meanings for words. While infant vocalization may begin as signaling, it rather quickly evolves into something more. We are not

learning a set of signals when we acquire speech.²² Rather, our speech is comprised of a logically formed and extensible system of symbols.²³ Here again, we are the only animal known to be capable of symbolizing and symbolic recursion.²⁴ Taken together, these capabilities enable an expandable matrix of social practices, which reciprocally comprise intra-group social relationships.

“The production of life, both of one’s own labour and of the fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relation — social in the sense that it denotes the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a ‘productive force’.”²⁵

Modern society has developed — over several thousand generations — from those beginnings. As our social history illustrates, those specific capacities do not prescribe one type or direction for our cultural evolution. Our capacity for shared intentionality, for example, has not obviated social conflict; our ability to create tools produced Zyklon B and the H-bomb. Social contradictions do not result simply because we are not as 'wise' as our taxon *sapiens* suggests, but they do demonstrate the innovative variability inherent in our transformative actions.

Thought and Social Practice

The phenomenon of consciousness has been the object of speculation — what is it, how does it happen — throughout written history. A well-known Zen *koan* frames the subject-object question by asking whether the dreamer is a man or a butterfly, but an entomologist might point out that the *Lepidoptera* nervous system is too primitive to support memory. Historical materialism, developed in opposition to philosophical idealism, answers this question directly: it is not human consciousness that produces our being; it is our social being which produces our consciousness.

This statement should not be interpreted to mean *only* that the brain is an organ for thought or

memory, or that thoughts are *simply* biochemical signals transmitted through a central nervous system. Although it is required for and enables thinking and memory, the physiology of the brain is not thinking. Brains do not produce symbols or memories from within. Thinking proceeds from interactions with others. The dialectical materialist psychologist Lev Vygotsky and his colleagues conducted path-breaking investigations of cognition during the revolutionary 1920s in Russia, demonstrating that cognitive ability develops through social interaction.²⁶ Human infants learn *how* to learn through dialogic exchange with others. Thus, we are not born ‘human’; we are made so through our interactions. We continue to acquire knowledge throughout our lives by internalizing direct and indirect shared experience, through social practices, including those of semiotic mediation — the forms through which we communicate with each other.^{27,28,29} In this process, we create our thoughts: as memories of dialogic experiences, as physical perceptions, and through a process of comparison and association that we sometimes experience as an ‘inner monologue.’³⁰

This assumes still greater significance when we consider the full history of our species. Humans migrated out from Africa in perhaps several waves, reaching across Asia as well as into Europe, out onto the Pacific, across the Bering Sea, and the length of the Western Hemisphere. This in itself demonstrates a range of transformative and transmitted behaviors that enabled ‘success’ in a tremendously wide range of habitats — from the African savannah to the Arctic tundra, from the Tibetan plateau to the Amazonian basin. While human presence has created habitat opportunities for fellow travelers (rodents and domestic cats are two examples), no other animal has demonstrated such a capacity for adapting to widely different climates and habitat.

Humans have not only responded to the environment, we have learned to remake it. The earliest details of how we learned are lost to the oral histories of the thousands of generations who came before the advent of written language about 5,000 years ago. Relying on their oral folklore our distant ancestors learned to predict climate and seasons, learned to control fire, learned to cultivate plants, learned to domesticate certain mammals, learned to create their own shelter, and with various other assembled skills and affinities eventually stepped into a more settled world; produced by their own hands and minds in dialogue with each other.

An ongoing argument within anthropology for most of the last century has been whether the breadth of human culture has been mainly a process of diffusion — the communication of practices from one group to another — or independent invention responding to specific similar or distinct conditions of life. Writing, for example, is thought to have developed independently in at least two cultures (Mayan and Sumerian) and possibly others (Indus), based on distinct glyphic systems and proto-grammars. Other examples can be inferred from the invention of crop cultivation, for while varieties of the same grains might be transplanted to different locales with similar climate (for example from east to west or vice versa), the same transfer would not be successful when moving longitudinally (south-north) or across elevations (into or out of significantly different climate zones).³¹ It would appear that *both* the social, interactive practices of innovation and of interchange are foundational to human cultural history, and have been employed by various — distinct and related — population groups at different times and in different places.³²

The Core of Culture is the Mode of Production

Every human society, regardless of its simplicity or complexity, coheres around modes of activity that solve the prerequisites of food, shelter, clothing and other basic physical and ideological needs. Generally, modes of production are comprised of the activities through which the group provides for this subsistence and reproduction, including the rules, customs, techniques, beliefs, and other ideas that have arisen from and in turn enable those basic activities, such as how those activities are communicated across generations and geography.

Marx described the capitalist mode of production as distinguished by two characteristics. First, the social product takes the form of commodities (a useful product of human labor created for exchange), and second, the aim of production is the creation of surplus-value (the value created by labor beyond its cost as labor-power), which is appropriated as interest, ground rent and profit by capitalists.³³ In this mode of production, the capitalists direct the kinds of social production and how the social surplus (the surplus-labor of the society as a whole) will be used as they compete to exchange commodities in various markets. Within this type of economy, human labor is one of the commodities produced and traded. The proletarian sells her labor-power for wages

with which she feeds, clothes and shelters herself and her dependants, and thereby lives to work another day (and create more surplus-value for the capitalists).

This does not mean that *only* one mode of production is possible in any society. Social practices are dynamic and human culture is constantly in process. For example, during the 12th and 13th centuries and continuing into the 18th, mercantile and small-scale productive capitalism co-existed with feudal agrarianism in much of Europe. Likewise, in some aboriginal North American societies observed during the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as among some Amazonian groups in the 20th, hunting/gathering co-exist with crop cultivation. In addition, from the 15th until the late 19th centuries, slave labor was essential to large-scale Euro-American capitalist farming and natural resource extraction in the Western Hemisphere. Nonetheless, within a given society at a specific period in time, one mode is dominant “whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity.”³⁴

The transformative quality of human culture both requires and enables the ensemble of *ideological* activities that explain, reproduce and challenge the underlying social practices of the society. We are not only capable of symbolizing; we require language, other sound and visual expression to enable our consciousness and our sociality. Our cultures are matrices of social practices. In order to operationalize a mode of life (hunting, cultivating, manufacturing, singing, painting, storytelling, writing) we cooperatively invent tools and techniques, which further transform our shared existence. All of this requires semiotic mediation — the expression and internalization of ideas — and that social interactivity in turn promotes new knowledge and expressions (words, meanings, etc.).

Early human advances in cognition were most likely confronted with many practical obstacles, not the least of which was recognizing cognition as the rationalization and internalization of social practice.³⁵ Consequently, in the course of thinking about themselves and the world, people developed belief systems and ‘world views’, some of which were partially accurate or largely inaccurate. For example, long ago humans observed various manifestations of seasonality and learned to track the passing of time in order to predict their requirements for migratory hunting,

agriculture, ceremonies, and other activity planning. Thus were created lunar and solar calendars. In various ancient societies, supernatural forces were assumed responsible for many of the phenomena being observed; the sun, the moon, major rivers, certain marine mammals, were ascribed with motive force. Coincidence was confused with causality, and successful predictions in one circumstance (seasonality as applied to cultivation) were sometimes generalized into ideological systems (the sun as an omnipotent god) in order to explain other phenomenon. We can recognize similar gaps between being and understanding in contemporary capitalist society, for example, ascribing the processes of economic exchange to supra-social ‘market forces,’ or the fetishism of commodities in which “a definite social relation between men assumes ... the fantastic form of a relation between things.”³⁶

Our awareness is created through our interactions with the rest of the world, but it can never be fully aligned to it: first, because material reality is expansive and continually changing and second, because our thinking is a symbolic interpretation, an abstraction formed from that reality. A hallmark of human cognition is ‘predictive thinking’ and being able to form hypotheses that describe probable events or outcomes. We can’t actually ‘see into the future’; we anticipate based on prior experience.

Division of Labor and Social Stratification

As far as is known, within nearly every society to date, regardless of the mode, production has been engaged according to a division of labor. The regular production of a surplus enables such a division — more is collected or produced than is consumed by those collecting or producing it — and reciprocally, a division of labor may enable producing a surplus by concentrating specific skills on specific social functions. Alternately, if the band, ethno-unit or society is unable to maintain a productive surplus, it typically collapses (rather than contract to a less complex productive mode) and its members die out, migrate, or merge as bands with other groups.³⁷ In just the last few decades, we have seen societies and state forms that have ‘failed,’ dissolved, been annexed or partitioned, and of course, throughout recorded history many states have been formed or dissolved because of social revolution or inter-state warfare.

Turning again to ethnography in search of historically analogous examples, at least some recent societies that have been primarily engaged in a combination of cultivation and hunting have done so through a division of labor between hunters and cultivators, reinforced with customs, rules, and other specialized behaviors that were developed and transmitted according to that division.³⁸ In addition to expressly productive tasks, a division of labor also developed between manual activities and ideological tasks, such as conducted by shamans, priests or medicine societies. These specializations were required to ensure the life and growth of the group; to develop specific practices, such as birthing, dying, hunting, cultivating and symbolizing; to innovate new practices, such as plant or animal domestication; and to communicate specific practices as knowledge, especially across generations.

The first division of labor within human ethno-units was likely between women and men and may have arisen from one of the qualities of human biological dimorphism; within a given breeding population group of our species, males are typically larger than females. This hypothesis contradicts some well-known earlier assertions following L. H. Morgan³⁹ who hypothesized that early human societies practiced a ‘primitive communalism’ in which labor was equally shared. Arguments *contra* Morgan have been proposed by various anthropologists who cite the behaviors of closely related hominids (as mentioned earlier). Others refer to analogous social relations as recorded by ethnographers over the past \approx 200 years, such as J. H. Moore’s 1978 survey of Human Relations Area Files⁴⁰ for evidence of exploitation of women by men in hunting and gathering societies. The only examples Moore found of ‘egalitarian’ societies — where there was no indication of such exploitation — were four groups who live or lived in marginal ecological zones that did not support a regular productive surplus (such as the Arctic coast and the North American Great Basin). However, those marginal zones were inhabited only after exploitative societies had fully occupied the more productive areas. Moore further argued that the subjugation of women provided a cultural model for the subjugation of men.⁴¹

Regardless of the moment and practice of origin, the differentiation of labor very early in human social history suggests the production of some amount of surplus. On that basis, societies cleaved according to provision and task. Those divisions would have promoted or reinforced in-group and cross-generational knowledge and technology transfer apropos to cultivation, hunting,

healing, tool making, etc. As noted earlier, recorded oral histories of many hunter-gatherer societies describe divisions between hunters and cultivators and between mental and manual activities. Those ethnographies (as well as other data, such as archaeological evidence) also suggest that those two divisions are linked, and that within the resulting strata further hierarchy, primary leaders, and inter-strata conflicts emerged shortly thereafter. These earliest divisions provide the starting points for later and more complex stratification. Out of this process, sections of society come to be ‘fixed’ in their social relationships as classes that are comprised of specific relationship types, distinct from other classes. In many societies, these class definitions are transferred across generations, as heredity. Stratification also promotes — and increasingly requires in order to reproduce those relationships — the further development of an ideological and political superstructure, which soon comes to direct every aspect of the society’s activities.

“The division of labor implies from the outset the division of the conditions of labor, of tools and materials, and thus the fragmentation of accumulated capital among different owners, and thus, also, the fragmentation between capital and labor, and the different forms of property itself.”⁴² It is in this division of labor (including the division between town and countryside) that private property and class distinctions are based. Marx and Engels considered this essential to understanding the dynamics of class society as well as to understanding how to create a new kind of society, free of class distinctions, exploitation and oppression.

Stratification Produces Class Struggle

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” With this statement in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels introduced their analysis that through all of human history “oppressor and oppressed stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on a now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”⁴³

The division of societies into distinct classes is enabled by the economic exploitation of subaltern classes by the dominant class: slave by master, serf by landlord, proletarian by capitalist. These classes exist as social contradictions. There is dialectical unity between the opposing classes in

such a society; one requires the other, but this is not a static relationship. The dominant class exists at the economic, political and ideological expense of the subaltern class. The economic disadvantage is generally evident in the respective life-ways of the opposed classes. The political disadvantage is evident in the nature of the laws and customs that promote those disadvantages. Ideologically, the ruling classes have free rein (by law as well as by economic control) to dominate the intellectual life of the society through philosophies, aesthetics, traditions and other sentiments that champion their position as elites and justify the subjugation of the other class. Beyond that fact, the ruling class also expropriates the symbolic innovations of the subaltern groups; the visual art, music, dance, poetry, prose and song created by the oppressed often become property of the dominant class in the intellectual market.⁴⁴

This socio-political contention between strata and classes is grounded in the division of society according to labor that, as proposed earlier, emerged first between men and women and between mental and manual labor. Here, the reciprocity between different forms of social practice is critically important. The division of labor as it has evolved is not incidental much less inconsequential to the society; it is a requisite component of the social order and its continued existence.

Without devising solutions to shared necessities — such as how to hunt most effectively, what plants to cultivate and when or how to attend to the sick and dying — the band cannot survive and thrive. Over time, these shared practices are explained and encoded as ideology. Knowledge is not acquired in the abstract or equally by all members of the group concurrently; as a process, it proceeds unevenly among individuals and is intentionally withheld or shared. Those discrepancies, transferred across generations, eventually come to comprise distinct ideological systems shared within specific sub-groups, strata or classes.

Given the burden of knowledge acquisition and transfer, especially for the many tens of thousands of years before the advent of writing, specialization of activity was both vitally important and subject to tremendous pressures. Nature (climate, weather, geology, biology) appeared as mysterious and dominating forces. Predation by other animals was always present. An unsuccessful collection or hunt could produce internal strife over causes and results, under

the constant specter of starvation. The spontaneous emergence of division morphed into codifications deemed necessary for survival and which came to be perceived as complementary to the conditions of life, as ‘natural’ as nature itself. From this process emerge concepts of medicine, taboo, morality, ethics, etc.

These ideological practices are tethered to how the society is structured and functions. The anthropologist Leslie White pithily noted that “religion is, at bottom, an affair of the emotions,”⁴⁵ but emotions — affective responses — are an interpretation of the real world. Marriage traditions and incest taboos promote exogamy⁴⁶ which can foster productivity by the group (by expanding its size) and reinforce peaceful coexistence with neighboring groups in their mutual use of resources (for hunting, cultivation, etc.). Origin stories explain in-group distinctions and traditions and thus promote social cohesion.

These interactions work in reverse as well. Shocks to the lifeways of the society call into question the ideologies that support and promote those lifeways. The 19th century encroachment of the US Army and European settlers onto the North American Plains undermined the status and role of the traditional Cheyenne clan system of Council Chiefs, prompting its replacement by the Soldier Chiefs.⁴⁷ The economic dislocations and prolonged slaughter of the First World War, combined with subaltern demands for peace and bread and land, prompted the overthrow of the 300 year-old Romanov dynasty and its replacement by a revolutionary socialist government.⁴⁸ In both cases, long-standing ideological support for the traditional order was overturned in favor of new worldviews.

The struggle within societies between strata and classes, and which appears to erupt more or less ‘spontaneously,’ takes as its starting point any of a wide variety of practices in politics, ideologies and/or economics. In times of acute social crisis, any aspect of how society operates is liable to be interrogated, and at such times, “(new) beginnings are to be seen literally on all sides.”⁴⁹

Economic Base, Political-Ideological Superstructure and the Need for Revolution

In their historical analysis, Marx and Engels specifically noted and partly described several types of societies that have existed over the past two thousand years, primarily citing the Mediterranean and Europe. Tribal societies, slave societies, feudal societies, and capitalist societies have each been characterized by distinctive but generalizable economic relationships and technologies (e.g. estate agriculture using slave labor together with small-scale handicraft production) and ideo-political superstructures (Roman or common law, literature and music, religions and customs, etc.) In every stratified society, the dominant class exerts hegemonic control over the rest of society, including over intellectual life, aspirations, and the ability of subaltern strata to express ideas independent of that dominant, ruling class narrative. The proletariat (and every other non-dominant class) is not only expropriated economically; they are expropriated in every aspect of culture including their intellectual life. Consider, for example, how the ruling class narrative defines popular discussions of 'democracy', 'dictatorship', 'violence', 'peace', 'terrorism', 'economic crisis', and so on.

The oppressed classes' struggle — as individuals and in groups — not just against the surface phenomenon of economic conditions, they push up against all of these other types of subjugation too, although often without awareness of the real nature of the contradiction or of potential outcomes. Within the system of class divisions, the boundaries of oppression — just like the actual composition of the classes — shift over time, depending upon the resistance of the oppressed, the rate of success/failure of the social economy, the relative political/military strength of the classes facing each other, and environmental conditions. Bourgeois revolutions often set out to overturn the hereditary rights that characterized earlier class societies, and replace those with the so-called 'inalienable rights of man.' Yet, as the history of the last 350 years shows, social status remains inheritably constrained (but not completely fixed) within capitalism; through inheritable property; through the bourgeois family; through literacy and a stratified education system; through acculturation in literature and arts; through national/ethnic oppression and racism, and so on.⁵⁰ As Marx and Engels observed, "class in its turn assumes an independent existence against the individuals, so that the latter find their conditions of life predetermined, and have their position in life and hence their personal development assigned to

them by their class, thus becoming subsumed under it.” This “subjection of the separate individuals to the division of labor ... can only be removed by the abolition of private property and of labor [i.e. the sale of labor-power] itself.”⁵¹ In other words, class societies reproduce themselves by reproducing the classes of social practices on which that mode of life is based.

Based on their analysis of historical succession, Marx and Engels theorized that class society was itself historical; that the blind necessity that had driven all prior class societies was being eclipsed by the current capabilities of social reproduction; and that therefore exploitative capitalist society could and should be brought to an end by the revolutionary class struggle of the proletariat. This struggle, aimed immediately at the capitalist state, must account for all the other components of the social superstructure and not only production relationships.

“The alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; the revolution is necessary therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.”⁵²

As 20th C. history shows, while an essential and great leap, the revolutionary transformation of the superstructure requires much more than ‘smashing the state’ and establishing a new regime of workers or their representatives. It is increasingly evident that the revolutionary transformation of all social relationships (economic, political and ideological) must be the program for the entire period of socialist transition. Short of that type of movement, the economic relationships at the outset of socialist reconstruction not only bear “the birth marks of the old society,”⁵³ they stand in active opposition to moving forward: an extensive division of labor; wage scales and the exchange of labor-power; various forms of small-scale production and commerce; the administration of public property, etc.

In order to create a society that has rid itself of the ‘muck of ages’ we need to refashion all of the ways in which we interact with each other; transform all of the social relationships upon which society is based. This is not just a matter of enacting laws or restructuring the economy, although

those are enabling actions from which we must start. This again speaks to the relationship between being and thinking; between the ways society is organized and functions and the ways we conceptualize each other. We cannot re-conceptualize ourselves without changing the ways in which we live; we cannot change those social relationships without re-conceptualizing our peers and ourselves.

Is Human History Directionally Orientated?

Marx wrote to Joseph Weydermeyer that “no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes or the struggle between them ... what I did new was to prove: 1) that the existence of classes is only bound up with particular historical phases of the development of production, 2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat, 3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society.”⁵⁴

This has led some to view socialist revolution and the demise of capitalism as inevitable and bound to occur, under the pressure of its own internal contradictions. There are indeed fundamental contradictions inherent in capitalist societies, not the least of which are those internal contradictions between exploitation and accumulation, between the proletarian and capitalist classes. However, patterns and trends in social history do not necessarily indicate all potential or future actions; human societies are inherently dynamic and variable, even — perhaps especially — when large numbers of its members attempt to act in concert, such as classes struggling to become conscious of their collective and strategic interests.

Engels spoke to social contingency in his notes on *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, and is worth citing at length here. “In spite of the consciously desired aims of all individuals, accident apparently reigns on the surface. That which is willed happens but rarely; in the majority of instances the numerous desired ends cross and conflict with one another, or these ends themselves are from the outset incapable of realization, or the means of attaining them are insufficient. ... The ends of the actions are intended, but the results which actually follow from these actions are not intended; or when they do seem to correspond to the

end intended, they ultimately have consequences quite other than those intended. ... Men make their own history, whatever its outcome may be, in that each person follows his own consciously desired end, and it is precisely the resultant of these many wills operating in different directions, and of their manifold effects upon the outer world, that constitutes history.”⁵⁵

The struggle for communist society is a struggle to overcome and do away with all of the inequalities that arise from the historic divisions of society and the division of labor. As the struggle between classes is fought out through every social relationship, it creates further potential for revolutionary transformation of all social relationships. The object of the socialist revolution is not simply an equal (or even generally-increased) distribution of the social product — such an equity between sellers and buyers can only reproduce the old social relations of capitalist exchange⁵⁶ — rather, the object must be the creation of new and non-exploitative social relationships in every field of activity. Most importantly, this applies to the proletariat itself, which must “rid itself of everything that still clings to it from its previous position in society.”⁵⁷

Instead of life's work as compulsory and alienated (so many units of labor-power within a capital process), communism envisions emancipatory ‘life’s work’ unfettered of narrow economic relationships. To arrive at that mode of life, we need to reorganize society beyond the narrow confines of the “bourgeois right,”⁵⁸ beyond an ‘equality’ grounded in commodity exchange and which masks the relationships among people with relationships between things. As Marx and Engels envisioned it, classless society enables the full realization of individuals through the full realization of society as a whole. In capitalist society, the prime objective for the worker is the sale of her labor-power for purposes directed by capital. Even one’s ‘free (unpaid) time’ and compensatory (in lieu of truly self-directed) activities are narrowly defined by capitalist relations, such as the periodic ‘freedom’ to purchase — or more often, borrow against — ‘non-essential’ consumer goods, make a holiday excursion, etc. As Marx and Engels envisioned it, communist society is one where “each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, [since] society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow.”⁵⁹ This vision of the future suggests but cannot propose specific solutions to every form of social contradiction, and it certainly strains an imagination subsumed in the present-day ideologies of late capitalism and the age-old traditions of class society. (e.g.,

how can everyone be competent or enabled to engage in every type of activity?) However, the scope and sociality of this vision stands exactly opposed to all of the brutality, muck and ennui of imperialist society, with its ruling class of loathsome parasites.

The oppressed can make their own history only through overcoming the ‘dead hand of the past’ — ideologies and practices that perpetuate exploitation and oppression. Historical materialism is an essential tool for decrypting those social practices. Especially important to the theory is the observation that “it is not a question so much of the motives of single individuals, however eminent, as of those motives which set in motion great masses, whole peoples, and again whole classes of people in each people. ... Everything which sets men in motion must go through their minds; but what form it will take in the mind will depend very much on the circumstances.”⁶⁰ We are who we are through our social practices and our socially transformative capabilities arise from that sociality, especially as class struggle.

Up through the mid-19th century, materialist philosophy had largely been constrained by mechanistic and reductionist interpretations: the world as an aggregate of things, each with a cause and effect. Marx and Engels liberated materialism from this conundrum by applying dialectical analysis; instead of a series of isolates, the physical world and human society were revealed as complex webs of interactive processes. Within the web of human culture is the communist project, based on the premise that overthrowing capitalism and building a new form of society is historically possible; the proletariat can act in that direction because of its position as a class within the matrices of contemporary social relationships. Our actions are generally deliberate, but not ‘inevitable’ or automatic, and often produce unanticipated consequences. For all of that, by acting we are transformative of society, the world and ourselves.

Of course, the advent of dialectical HM has not meant the demise of idealist and subjectivist modes of thought. It did however expand the proletarian class struggle — already taking place over economic and political relationships — into the realm of philosophy and within the ideological superstructure more broadly. In that way, by providing a framework for interpreting the world, HM dialectically enables the communist hypothesis to change it. The manifestations of this ideological struggle (such as against idealism and subjectivism) are of critical importance

for those struggling to revolutionize society.

For example, in their examination and analysis of society, Marx and Engels adopted the approach of isolating and dissecting various social relationships in their phenomenal forms — such as labor-power, surplus-value, constant capital, economic base, political and ideological superstructure — in order to describe internal features and specific categories of interaction. These specific features were examined by Marx in order to understand society as a whole process, as a ‘rich totality of many relations.’

“It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production. However, on closer examination this proves false. The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest. e.g. wage labour, capital, etc. These latter in turn presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price etc. Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception [*Vorstellung*] of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts [*Begriff*], from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations.”⁶¹

This approach remains vulnerable to one-sided and reductionist interpretations and, indeed, some activists have made those types of mistakes; adopting mechanical and atomized perspectives — over that of capitalism as a matrix of international process — fragmenting the relationships between economics, politics and ideology in the near-term revolutionary class struggle and as they affect the longer struggle for communism. Those misinterpretations have had harmful and often disastrous effects. For example, various conceptualizations of socialism have been advanced over the past century which give priority to productive capacity, types of technology, or amounts of output as the ‘key link’ for creating socialism and for revolutionizing society,

substituting these for the truly key objectives of socialist revolution: the radical transformations of all economic, political and ideological social relationships. Similarly, various visions of anti-capitalist social change center on organizing incremental economic oppositions to individual capital formations, policies or capitalists in place of advancing the struggle to challenge all of the oppressive and exploitative social relationships inherent in capitalist society, including and especially the character of the state. Within the ranks of the proletarian movement, the failure to recognize and accurately advance the struggle over key matters of ideology, of materialist dialectics, as well as of the analysis of specific socio-political moments, contributed to the reversals of socialism in the USSR and China, and to the misdirection of many revolutionary movements in other countries worldwide.⁶² Our practical and theoretical work today is very much grounded in those past practices — successes and failures — and on the struggle to accurately assess them.

As current events continually remind us, the social world is not frozen, waiting for the oppressed and exploited to seize the day. The outrages and atrocities of capitalism are an ongoing assault on the great majority of the people of the world and on the planet itself. The clock is always ticking. For us, the project for the future will only advance if we assume among our component tasks the critical opposition to such mechanistic and ‘metaphysical’ conceptualizations and the further critical development of dialectical, revolutionizing, historical materialist practice and theory.

Notes:

[Abbreviations for multi-volume book sets: MECW = Marx and Engels Collected Works; MESW = Marx and Engels Selected Works; LCW = V.I. Lenin Collected Works]

¹ Marx, K. 1967/1867. *Capital*. Vol. 1. New York. p 29. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p3.htm>>

² *Capital*. Vol. 1. p 29. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p3.htm>>

³ Marx, K. and F. Engels. 1976/1848. *The German Ideology*. MECW 5. New York. p 53. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm#5a7>>

⁴ Describing 1848, Engels wrote “the Paris uprising found its echo in the victorious insurrections in Vienna, Milan and Berlin; when the whole of Europe right up to the Russian frontier was swept into the movement.” see Marx, K. 1969/1850. *The Class Struggles in France*. MESW Vol. 1. Moscow. p. 189. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1895/03/06.htm>>

- ⁵ *Capital*. Vol. 1. p. 29. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p3.htm>> See also: Engels, F. 1969/1886. *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. MESW Vol. 3. Moscow. esp. Part IV on Marx. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/ch04.htm>>
- ⁶ Marx, K. 1969/1869. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. MESW Vol. 1. Moscow. p. 398. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>>
- ⁷ German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel was a very strong influence for Marx and other radical thinkers of the day.
- ⁸ *Capital*, Vol. 1. p. 19. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p1.htm>>
- ⁹ *The German Ideology*. p 38. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm#5b1>>
- ¹⁰ Moore, J. H. 1977. The Evolution of Exploitation. *Critique of Anthropology* 2(8): 33-48.
- ¹¹ Moore, J. H. 1978. The Exploitation of Women in Evolutionary Perspective. *Critique of Anthropology* 3(9-10): 83-100.
- ¹² Terray, E. and J. S. Kahn. 1979. On Exploitation: Elements of an Autocritique. *Critique of Anthropology* 4(13-14): 29-39.
- ¹³ Brennan, J. and J. Anderson. 1988. Varying responses to feeding competition in a group of rhesus monkeys (*Macaca mulatta*). *Primates* 29(3): 353-360.
- ¹⁴ Starin, E. D. 2006. Patterns of food transfer in temminck's red colobus. *Aggressive Behavior* 32(3): 181-186.
- ¹⁵ Whiten, A. and C. P. van Schaik. 2007. The evolution of animal 'cultures' and social intelligence. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 362(1480): 603-620.
- ¹⁶ Cheney, D., R. Seyfarth, B. Smuts. 1986. Social relationships and social cognition in nonhuman primates. *Science* 234(4782): 1361-1366.
- ¹⁷ By evolution, I mean simply 'the change in properties of populations of organisms over time' as per Ernst Mayr.
- ¹⁸ Tomasello, M. 2001. Cultural Transmission: A View from Chimpanzees and Human Infants. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 32(2): 135-146.
- ¹⁹ Tomasello, M., M. Carpenter, J. Call, T. Behne, and H. Moll. 2005. Understanding and sharing intentions: The origins of cultural cognition. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28(05): 675-691.
- ²⁰ Herrmann, E., J. Call, M. V. Hernández-Lloreda, B. Hare, M. Tomasello. 2007. Humans Have Evolved Specialized Skills of Social Cognition: The Cultural Intelligence Hypothesis. *Science* 317(5843): 1360-1366.
- ²¹ Tomasello, M. and H. Rakoczy. 2003. What Makes Human Cognition Unique? From Individual to Shared to Collective Intentionality. *Mind & Language* 18(2): 121-147.
- ²² Wertsch, J. V. 1985. *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind*. Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press.
- ²³ Vygotsky, L. 1986. *Thought and Language*. Cambridge, MIT Press. p. 68-95. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/words/ch04.htm>>
- ²⁴ Hauser, M. D., N. Chomsky, et al. 2002. The Faculty of Language: What Is It, Who Has It, and How Did It Evolve? *Science* 298(5598): 1569-1579.
- ²⁵ *The German Ideology*. p 43. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a3>>
- ²⁶ Vygotsky. *Thought and Language*. p. 68-95. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/words/ch04.htm>>
- ²⁷ Moll, H. and M. Tomasello. 2007. Cooperation and human cognition: the Vygotskian intelligence hypothesis. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 362(1480): 639-648.
- ²⁸ Fernyhough, C. 1996. The dialogic mind: A dialogic approach to the higher mental functions. *New Ideas in Psychology* 14(1): 47-62.
- ²⁹ Wertsch, J. V. and P. Tulviste. 1992. L. S. Vygotsky and Contemporary Developmental Psychology. *Developmental Psychology* 28(4): 548-557.
- ³⁰ Vygotsky. *Thought and Language*. p. 210-256. <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/words/vygotsky.htm>>
- ³¹ Several examples are discussed in Diamond, J. 1997. *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. New York, W.W. Norton.
- ³² For tens of thousands of years this may also have involved interchange between *Homo sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalensis*, another, somewhat earlier species of humans who also populated areas of Africa and Eurasia. C.f. Mellars, P. 1988. The Origins and Dispersal of Modern Humans. *Current Anthropology* 29(1): 186-188.

- ³³ Marx, K. 1967. *Capital*. Vol. 3. New York. p. 879-880. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch51.htm>>
- ³⁴ Marx, K. 1973. *Grundrisse*. New York. p. 107-108. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm#3>>
- ³⁵ A related illustration might be the schizophrenic perceiving their own thoughts to be external voices. c.f. Fernyhough, C. 2004. Alien voices and inner dialogue: towards a developmental account of auditory verbal hallucinations. *New Ideas in Psychology* 22(1): 49-68.
- ³⁶ *Capital*, Vol. 1. p. 77. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4>>
- ³⁷ c.f. Diamond, J. 2005. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York. Viking.
- ³⁸ Ethnography is rich on this topic, but an illustrative sample would be: Sharrock, S. R. 1974. Crees, Cree-Assiniboinés, and Assiniboinés: Interethnic Social Organization on the Far Northern Plains. *Ethnohistory* 21(2): 95-122. Moore, J. H. 1974. Cheyenne Political History, 1820-1894. *Ethnohistory* 21(4): 329-359. Southall, A. 1976. Nuer and Dinka Are People: Ecology, Ethnicity and Logical Possibility. *Man* 11(4): 463-491. Moore, J. H. 1994. Putting Anthropology Back Together Again. *American Anthropologist* 96(4): 925-948. Masco, J. 1995. "It is a Strict Law That Bids Us Dance": Cosmologies, Colonialism, Death, and Ritual Authority in the Kwakwaka'wakw Potlatch, 1849 to 1922. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37(1): 41-75.
- ³⁹ Morgan's survey *Ancient Society* (1877) is cited by Engels throughout *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm>>
- ⁴⁰ HRAF is a collaborative archive at Yale University that catalogues worldwide ethnographic data. < <http://www.yale.edu/hraf/>>
- ⁴¹ Moore. 'Exploitation of Women'.
- ⁴² *The German Ideology*. p. 86. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm#5d9>>
- ⁴³ Marx, K. and F. Engels. 1969/1848. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. MESW Vol. 1. Moscow. p. 109. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm>>
- ⁴⁴ This is obviously the case in many fields of intellectual activity, where patents, copyright and other contracts assign 'intellectual property' rights to the employer, not the intellectual employee.
- ⁴⁵ White, L. A. 1926. An Anthropological Approach to the Emotional Factors in Religion. *The Journal of Philosophy* 23(20): 546-554.
- ⁴⁶ White, L. A. 1948. The Definition and Prohibition of Incest. *American Anthropologist* 50(3): 416-435.
- ⁴⁷ Moore. 'Cheyenne Political History'.
- ⁴⁸ c.f. Lenin, V.I. 1964/1917. *Lessons of the Revolution*. LCW Vol. 25. Moscow. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/06.htm>>
- ⁴⁹ Lenin, V.I. 1964/1920. 'Left-wing' Communism – An infantile disorder. LCW Vol. 31. Moscow. p. 101. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch10.htm>>
- ⁵⁰ Studies of education practices in the US have shown that a large majority of low-income and ethnic-minority students are regularly placed in 'low-skilled' educational tracks. c.f. Condrón, D. J. 2007. Stratification and Educational Sorting: Explaining Ascriptive Inequalities in Early Childhood Reading Group Placement. *Social Problems* 54(1): 139-160.
- ⁵¹ *The German Ideology*. p. 77. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm#p76>>
- ⁵² *The German Ideology*. p. 53. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm#5a7>>
- ⁵³ Marx, K. 1969/1875. *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. MESW Vol. 3. Moscow. p. 17. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>>
- ⁵⁴ Marx, K. 1969. Letter to J. Weydermeyer in New York. 5 March 1852. MESW Vol. 1. Moscow. p. 528. < http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/letters/52_03_05.htm>
- ⁵⁵ Engels, F. 1969/1888. *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. MESW Vol. 3. p. 366. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/ch04.htm>>

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- ⁵⁶ Where “he, who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer.” *Capital* Vol. 1 p. 172. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch06.htm>>
- ⁵⁷ *The German Ideology*. p. 88. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01d.htm#5d10>>
- ⁵⁸ *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. p. 18. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/ch01.htm>>
- ⁵⁹ *The German Ideology*. p. 47. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a4>>
- ⁶⁰ *Ludwig Feuerbach*. p. 367. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/ch04.htm>>
- ⁶¹ *Grundrisse*. p. 107-108. < <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm#3>>
- ⁶² c.f. Ely, M. 1980. Slipping into Darkness, ‘Left’ economism, the CPUSA, and the Trade Union Unity League (1929 – 1935). *Revolution* 5(2-3). < <http://mikeely.wordpress.com/2008/02/09/cpusa-in-30s-slipping-into-darkness/>>